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Citation for published version:

Volpi, F 2020, 'Algeria: When elections hurt democracy', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 152-165.
<<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/753201>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of Democracy

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy

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On 22 February 2019, a massive wave of protests that came to be called the Hirak (movement) began in Algeria. Over the following year, millions of Algerians took to the streets in weekly demonstrations that first ousted four-term president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, then grew into a protracted struggle over a familiar issue: elections. But although the presidential election that was held on 12 December 2019 was one outcome of the Hirak, it was clearly *not* what the protesters had sought. Rather than calling for the rerun of a fraudulent vote, the Hirak supporters sought to keep Algeria's military-backed regime from holding unfair elections in the first place.

On two occasions, the protesters succeeded in forcing the cancellation of scheduled presidential elections. The demonstrations were initially sparked by the announcement that the ailing Bouteflika, who has been barely able to move and talk since a stroke in 2013, would seek a fifth term in April 2019. Under pressure from the street, the April balloting was cancelled in mid-March, and Bouteflika left office two weeks later. Plans for a July election without Bouteflika as a candidate, initially mooted by the provisional government that took office when the longtime president resigned, met with a similar fate.

In December, however, Algeria's ruling elite had its way, staging a controlled balloting in which no regime outsiders took part. The victor, officially claiming 58.2 percent of the vote, was Abdelmadjid Tebboune. The 74-year-old Tebboune, a longtime member of the ruling National

Liberation Front (FLN) and a close ally of the powerful army chief of staff Ahmed Gaid Salah, thus replaced the 82-year-old Bouteflika—also a longtime FLN member and an ally of General Gaid Salah.

Algeria's protesters wanted to jettison a pseudodemocratic system that made the outcome of any election all too predictable. The military High Command and its political allies, however, had strategic reasons to proceed with the December vote, and it was their wishes that set the course of the provisional government. In part, the election was a response to concerns about intraregime stability. Milan Svobik has highlighted that when the possibility of violence arises in an authoritarian polity, elite power sharing is at least as important for the regime's stability as authoritarian control over the population.¹ The election that handed the presidency to Abdelmadjid Tebboune was first and foremost a strategic choice to ensure the former.

Late on the morning of Friday, December 13, as hundreds of thousands of protesters began gathering for their weekly march, election-authority president Mohamed Charfi informed the press that the election had occurred in "a festive atmosphere unequalled since the day of independence."² Though Charfi did observe that turnout was at an all-time low, just under 40 percent, he did not venture to explain that in several provinces Hirak protests had ensured that no voting could take place. Regardless, Charfi was pleased to announce that Tebboune had officially received more than half the vote, meaning that no second round would be needed.

An editorial in *El Moudjahid*, the state-controlled newspaper, celebrated the election as "a perfect translation of the commitment of the NPA [National Popular Army] High Command to accompany the People on the road to deepening democracy."³ Like Bouteflika twenty years earlier, Tebboune was handed the presidency by the state administration under the guidance of the High Command. In his first declaration to the press after his victory was announced, the new

president paid his respects to the army and particularly to General Gaid Salah. Tebboune thanked the security forces that “wisely accompanied these events and ensured that not a drop of blood was spilled in spite of the plans of those who wanted to destroy the Algerian state.”⁴

Events in Algeria underscore how extremely difficult it is for popular mobilization to unseat regimes dominated by entrenched military interests. Looking back at the record of the Arab Spring uprisings, this is hardly news.⁵ But these events also point to a difficulty facing rulers who rely on electoral authoritarianism: The longer these regimes persist in power, the less effective pseudodemocratic mechanisms become at solving legitimacy problems. In *The Politics of Uncertainty*, Andreas Schedler stresses that electoral authoritarian regimes succeed by constructing a political system within which opposition actors and voters believe there is at least a possibility that they can bring about change.⁶ The Hirak illustrates what can happen when the public revises its views on this count.

Algeria’s Entrenched Electoral Authoritarianism

At the end of the 1990s, Algeria’s regime had emerged as the victor of a brutal, decade-long civil war that began when a January 1992 military coup ended the democratic experiment of 1988–91. By 2019, however, it had been many years since the regime had experienced a powerful mass-based challenge to its political legitimacy. Only during the 2001 “Black Spring” in the northern region of Kabylia did such a challenge occur, at least on the local level. This movement, in which residents of the ethnic-Berber region rose up in protests and riots triggered by the gendarmerie’s shooting of a high-school student, was brutally repressed by the security forces. Since the regime made it look like it centered on the particular concerns of the Berbers, it did not spread to other regions of the country. A few years later, when opposition political parties

sought to challenge the regime over its scrapping of term limits in 2008, they proved unable to mobilize Algerians outside their existing support base.

Likewise, Algeria was an outlier during the Arab Spring. Although the country experienced an intense week of unrest in January 2011, antiregime mobilization failed to put forward a clear enough message or gather sufficient momentum to seriously challenge the ruling elite. Protest mobilization quickly gave way to riots and ran out of steam in just over week, while political mobilization never took off due to opposition parties failing to link up with protesters and squabbling among themselves. After the January riots gave a jolt to the system, the regime swiftly responded with a combination of minimal political reforms, limited repression, and substantive social-welfare incentives and economic subsidies.⁷ The regime's efforts at cooptation were all the more effective because the political opposition proved unable to effectively harness antiregime feelings and did not present a united front. Since the Algerian regime made it through the Arab Spring relatively unscathed, many believed it to be more resilient than the region's other authoritarian systems.

The Hirak presented a more serious test for Algerian authoritarianism. Crucially, the spark for this movement was political rather than social or economic (although socioeconomic concerns were always present in the background). It started with a miscalculation by the ruling elites, who wrongly decided that granting a fifth term in office to President Bouteflika was their best way of maintaining the political status quo. As in the events leading up to the "color revolutions" of the mid-2000s, a pseudodemocratic regime's botched effort to renew its legitimacy through elections created more problems than it solved.⁸ But whereas the protests that produced the "color revolutions" took place in the aftermath of fraudulent elections, those in Algeria began as soon as the incumbent announced his candidacy.

To maintain its grip on power over the decades, the Algerian regime had relied on three main tools. First, it employed the security apparatus to repress open dissent both during brief episodes of popular unrest (such as the Black Spring) and during the long civil conflict of the 1990s, which pitted the regime against multiple Islamist-led guerrilla movements. Second, the regime made wide use of patronage underpinned by oil and gas revenue. This tool was particularly effective because a bloated state administration, together with the prevalence of dysfunctional state and state-backed companies, ensured that the state remained the country's main economic actor. Third, the regime periodically enacted limited political reforms and made various efforts to coopt the opposition and reduce the costs of repression.

Like many nondemocratic regimes in the 1990s and 2000s, Algeria's military elites and their political allies used the tools of electoral authoritarianism to sustain their legitimacy.⁹ In the decades after 1992, the Algerian regime progressively evolved from a military regime to a pseudodemocratic system headed by civilians (mostly from the FLN) and backed by the military. The election of a civilian president (Bouteflika) in 1999 and authorization of new parties at the time of the Arab Spring were important elements in the construction of Algerian pseudodemocracy. The regime also resorted to various other limited concessions when challenged: These include the 1999 Civil Concord Law, which reintegrated some Islamist actors, and the cessation in 2011 of the state of emergency that had been in effect since 1992. During the 2019 protests, the concessions offered were an internal purge presented as a drive to eliminate "corrupt" insiders and practices, and the organization of new elections in which Bouteflika would not participate but various "reformist" candidates would.

The Hirak Mobilization

The Algerian regime's decision to propose a new term for Bouteflika provided the initial spark for the Hirak. The longtime president's extremely poor health led many Algerians to doubt whether he was able to govern, and the regime's blatant play to prolong the status quo by keeping him in office triggered a massive and unexpected demand for change. Behind this frustration with political inertia stood equally serious socioeconomic discontent: Bouteflika's retention was taken as a sign that no shift in course was likely, and this meant no serious efforts to tackle the country's steadily deteriorating economic situation. Unanimous endorsement of Bouteflika by the country's proregime parties and civic associations underscored the farcical nature of the planned election. So, too, did an announcement by Bouteflika's team that the president would not be campaigning due to his poor health. Instead, his supporters carried around large portraits of the president during rallies to symbolize his presence.

The Hirak began with an uncoordinated wave of protests in the second half of February, following the announcement of Bouteflika's candidacy. In a show of defiance, some protesters targeted portraits of the president that were displayed in public spaces. The press began reporting large street demonstrations across the country's major towns on Friday, February 22. Particularly among Algeria's very active student population, social media played an important role in facilitating the initial mobilization. Beyond the initial core of activists and students, however, new participants were drawn in by word of mouth and by the physical visibility of the protests, particularly after prayer on Fridays. At this point, social media served as tools for coordinating the protests more effectively, providing information on police activity, and publicizing the movement's overall themes and ethos.¹⁰

A variety of social constituencies participated in the Hirak protests, and their diversity shaped the spatial and temporal patterns of mobilization. In general, the largest Hirak protests

have taken place on Fridays after prayer, although there have also been smaller but well-organized events on Tuesdays led by student organizations. The choice of Fridays indicates that Hirak organizers are seeking the support of mosque goers, a strategic decision that reflects both the involvement of activists with Islamist leanings and the acceptance of these activists by their more secularized counterparts. This forms a stark contrast with the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, during which secularized opposition supporters chose to hold protests on Saturdays to set themselves apart from their more religious peers. By 2019, the specter of the Islamist insurrection of the 1990s was no longer holding Algerians back in the way that it once had—as was illustrated by slogans such as, “you do not scare us with the black decade, we grew up in misery.”¹¹

Students, leftists, and feminists would tend to mobilize on Tuesdays as well as on Fridays before prayer and begin to occupy major public spaces. When Friday prayer finished, they would be joined by large crowds of mosque goers of all ages, especially those coming from the poorer suburbs. The different groups quickly arrived at a *modus vivendi* according to which, in order to present a united front against the regime, they generally avoided overt expression of political affiliation or religiosity. While slogans such as “*dawla islamiyya*” (Islamic state) could be heard among some of the Islamist supporters, they surfaced only occasionally, and they were far less popular than what became the standard rallying cry of “*dawla madania, machi aaskaria*” (a civilian state, not a military one).

The protesters made their first show of force on Friday, March 1, when the media reported crowds of between two- and three-million people across the country. Startled by the size of the protests, those opposition politicians who had initially put themselves forward as candidates for the presidential election opted to withdraw. On the following Friday, March 8, an

estimated five-million Algerians took to the streets to protest against Bouteflika's candidacy. The following day, the higher-education ministry announced an early start to university holidays in a thinly disguised effort to contain student participation. Spurred by pressure from the street, a growing number of dissenting voices from within the proregime parties began to express publicly their opposition to a fifth term for Bouteflika.

Under pressure, Bouteflika announced on March 11 that he would not seek a mandate to serve out a new term in April after all. Instead, he proposed organizing a constitutional revision, to occur by the end of 2019, as a prelude to holding new elections, with his current presidential term to be extended until this took place. This proposal failed to placate the millions of Algerians who took to the streets the next Friday. Over the following week, more and more regime insiders openly voiced their opposition to Bouteflika's plan and even their support for the Hirak. On March 26, General Gaid Salah, who had previously supported Bouteflika, publicly suggested that the Constitutional Council should declare the president unfit to rule and transfer power to the president of the legislature's upper house. Following another millions-strong round of protests on March 29, Bouteflika finally relented. On April 2, he announced that he was stepping down.

After Bouteflika

The following Friday, the Hirak protests still drew millions of Algerians, but their main demands had evolved: The demonstrators now called for the resignation of the provisional government and for new procedures that would prevent the authorities from engaging in electoral manipulation. The main target of the protesters became the "3 Bs"—Noureddine Bedoui (the prime minister recently appointed by Bouteflika), Abdelkader Bensalah (the interim president, formerly president of the upper house), and Tayeb Belaiz (the president of the Constitutional

Council). Since these actors had occupied positions of power within the state for decades, Hirak participants unsurprisingly viewed them as representatives of the old regime. Hence when the provisional government, supported by the chief of staff, officially proposed that a new presidential election be held on July 4, protesters came out in force against the prospect of a balloting over which regime elites would presumably maintain control.

Throughout April and May, millions of Algerians kept mobilizing in weekly Hirak protests against the proposed presidential election. This pressure from the street was instrumental in convincing coopted opposition politicians who had previously participated in regime-organized elections not to put their names forward to run for president in July. In early June, the provisional government eventually backed away from its plans for a July election, as the Constitutional Council declared that there were not enough candidates who met the requirements to take part. With its plans to placate the protesters through an election derailed, the regime shifted to a new strategy: a highly publicized judicial anticorruption campaign that targeted key figures of the Bouteflika administration.

In the following months, the protesters made some efforts to present their own roadmap as an alternative to the regime's electoral agenda. On June 15, July 6, and August 24, under the umbrella of the National Forum for Dialogue, the more organized activists' networks of the protest movement gathered to devise common positions and formulate demands for a transparent political system. Yet progress was slow because both activists and many ordinary protesters were reluctant to rely on the traditional opposition parties, which were discredited in the eyes of movement participants. As a result, the most they could agree upon was forming a consultative body to draft proposals that would in turn be formally endorsed at a general assembly representative of the Hirak.¹² Tentative discussions took place between representatives of the

provisional government and those of the movement under the “civic forum for change” initiative, led by politician Karim Younes, but these too failed to produce concrete results; the cases of Hirak protesters who had been jailed remained a crucial point of disagreement. By early September, the regime was already gearing up to organize another presidential election. To this end, it established an “independent” electoral commission that enjoyed support from some members of the civic forum but lacked the backing of most of the Hirak.

The months between June and September were a missed opportunity for the Hirak to promote the political and institutional reforms that it wanted after having successfully destabilized the ruling elite. In the end, the regime was able to steer the institutional agenda and set an electoral timetable because the various groups of protesters did not manage to rally behind a common leadership and articulate a clear agenda for political change. The Hirak, like many other contemporary protest movements, was “leaderless”; when the names of particular participants became widely known, this was often because they had been arrested by the police (as in the cases of Samir Belarbi, Karim Tabbou, and Abdelwahab Fersaoui). In part, this situation stemmed from the fear among many ordinary protesters that “their” movement could be hijacked by self-proclaimed representatives who would be coopted by the regime, or who at least might steer the Hirak in a direction of which these protesters did not approve. Although the “big tent” character of the Hirak gave it strength and endurance, it also made it difficult for specific representatives to speak in the movement’s name. As a result, the Hirak could not take advantage of the hesitations and divisions that plagued the regime elite following the June election cancellation.

On September 15, interim president Bensalah announced that a new presidential election would take place on December 12, a date that was first suggested by the chief of staff. This

announcement had little impact on the Hirak, which continued every week until December to mobilize protesters in numbers that regularly reached into the millions. Yet whereas protesters continued demanding the departure of the “gang” (“*issaba*”) of thieves, as they called the regime, there was less vocal opposition to the regime’s election plans this time around. Given this situation, some political actors who were close to the regime but had not directly participated in the previous government opted to run in the presidential race on a “reformist” ticket.

Once the campaign began on November 13, however, all contenders immediately found themselves facing serious public hostility. It proved extremely difficult for candidates to hold public meetings anywhere in the country, as these were systematically disrupted by protesters. Campaign material and the pictures of candidates displayed in public places were destroyed or defaced. In the end, the presidential candidates were able to conduct only a limited campaign, promoting themselves on social media and on state-controlled national television or private networks close to the regime.

The Regime’s Strategic Choices

The Hirak protests, which were both peaceful and sustained without the involvement of political parties, were the largest wave of antiregime expression that the country had witnessed since the 1992 coup. The very size of the mobilization made it difficult for the regime to manage with its usual toolkit of repressive and redistributive measures. Hence Algeria’s rulers defaulted to a mainly political response.

While the united front presented by the Hirak protests clearly came as a surprise to Algeria’s ruling elites, these elites had already been pondering for several years the question of what would happen when Bouteflika’s rule came to an end. By 2019, some within the regime

were clearly uneasy about the rise of the longtime ruler's brother Said Bouteflika, who increasingly replaced the ailing president in decision-making processes. As Abdelaziz Bouteflika's fourth term unfolded, different regime factions began maneuvering to position their preferred candidates for nomination as his successor. The earliest and the most spectacular conflict to come out of this scheming occurred in late 2015 and pitted the head of the security services, General Mohamed Mediene (known as "Toufik"), against the supporters of Bouteflika. It resulted in Toufik's ouster after 25 years as Algeria's top intelligence chief. Internal divisions then subsided before resurfacing in 2018, when figures within the proregime parties (the FLN and the National Democratic Rally, or RND) began voicing their dissent in public debates.

Once the Hirak protests started, the shallowness of support for Bouteflika within the regime quickly became evident. Many regime supporters soon voiced their support for the demonstrators and withdrew their endorsements of the president. On March 19, RND spokesperson Seddik Chihab declared on television that his party had made a mistake when it decided to support Bouteflika's candidacy. Even more damaging for the president's camp was the backpedaling of their allies in the security apparatus, most notably General Gaid Salah. On March 18, commenting on the Hirak, Gaid Salah declared that he had "full confidence in the wisdom of the people" and recognized the "noble objectives" of the protesters.¹³ A week later, in a speech to the armed forces broadcast on national television, the chief of staff stated that in his view Bouteflika should be declared incapacitated.

Gaid Salah's stance may seem puzzling, since he had been a longstanding ally of the president. Yet his remarks reflected a sober cost-benefit analysis on the part of the military establishment.¹⁴ The regime never deployed the full force of its repressive apparatus in part due to internal divisions within the ruling elite, and in part because the sheer size of the protest

movement posed a practical challenge for the security forces. Internally, Said Bouteflika reached out to Toufik and to Liamin Zeroual, a former general and ex-president, in an effort to set up a transitional body led by Zeroual instead of transferring power (as constitutionally mandated) to Bensalah, who was close to the chief of staff. For Algeria's ruling elites, the Hirak exacerbated the problem of authoritarian power sharing.¹⁵

Evidence from the 2011 riots indicated that Algeria's security forces used repression to greatest effective as a preventive measure in the lead-up to protest. Once protests reached critical mass, the security services were instead inclined to contain and manage them until they ran out of steam.¹⁶ In 2019, the speed and informality of the mobilization process, as well as the number of protesters, made the security forces opt quickly for containment. This choice was reinforced by the protesters' own strategy of not antagonizing the security services. Over the months, they returned time and again to the slogan, "the people and the army are brothers." In addition, the demonstrators placed a strong emphasis on keeping the movement nonviolent. From the start, another standard refrain was "*Silmiya, Silmiya*" ("peaceful, peaceful"). Over the months, the number of protesters and activists arrested stayed relatively low considering the size of the protests, although more than a hundred people did remain in custody at the time of the December 2019 elections. The majority of arrests and detentions were linked to the display of Berber flags, which the chief of staff had singled out as a threat to national unity.

In this context, the regime's main strategy for assuaging the anger of the protesters was to propose governance reforms. The regime touted its "anticorruption" campaign, which targeted Bouteflika's erstwhile allies, as a reform measure. The key regimes figures imprisoned included Said Bouteflika, two former prime ministers, two former intelligence chiefs, numerous former ministers, and regional governors; prominent businessmen were also arrested. In addition, the

president's brother, Toufik, former intelligence chief Athmane Tartag, and former president Zeroual were convicted of having engaged in anti-state conspiracy and "undermined the authority of the army."¹⁷ Such scapegoating enabled the provisional government to claim that it was addressing one of the protesters' main concerns: catching the "thieves" responsible for people's socioeconomic hardship. In practice, however, this anticorruption campaign allowed the faction led by the chief of staff to eliminate its main competitors within the regime.

The December Election and Beyond

After two successive failures at organizing a presidential election, Algeria's rulers made it clear in September that this time they were serious. While the Hirak declared that it was still opposed to electing a president so long as the regime remained in control of the electoral process, over the weeks following the announcement several regime insiders indicated that they would join the race. On November, the president of the election authority announced the approval of five candidates: Ali Benflis, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Azzedine Mihoubi, Abdelkader Bengrina, and Abdelaziz Belaïd. They were respectively two former prime ministers, a former culture minister, a former tourism minister, and the leader of a small splinter party that had broken away from the FLN. A victory by any of these candidates would represent continuity in power for the ruling elite. This situation helped the protest movement to keep up its momentum, but calls for general strikes that would pressure the government into calling off the election went unanswered. Limited channels for mobilization within the unions and the unwillingness of part of the movement to seriously disrupt everyday economic activities and raise the stakes in its struggle with the regime meant that strike actions remained limited.

Ahead of the election, the two former prime ministers emerged as the frontrunners due to their high-level connections with the regime. Benflis had been prime minister during Bouteflika's first term in office, but had quickly grown critical of the president's policies and decided to challenge him for the presidency. Finishing second in the 2004 and 2014 presidential elections, Benflis positioned himself as a regime-compatible opposition player. Tebboune served as prime minister for only a few months in 2017; he was dismissed by Bouteflika after the anticorruption campaign Tebboune initiated heightened tensions between different factions within the regime. Tebboune was close to the chief of staff, so much so that he had to declare publicly that he was not the candidate of the army. In line with the regime's overall attempt to reinvent itself as a reformist entity distinct from the previous "gang" of corrupt ministers and politicians, Tebboune chose to run as an "independent"—even though he remained a member of the FLN and its central committee. Two days before the presidential election, in a final bid to publicly signal the regime's reformist intent, a court conveniently delivered a guilty verdict against the last two prime ministers of the Bouteflika era. They were sentenced to twelve- and fifteen-year prison terms, respectively, on corruption-related charges.

On 12 December 2019, the Algerian presidential election took place against the background of massive street protests. Tebboune's victory is unlikely to bring an end to the country's political crisis. The new president is a longtime member of the ruling elite whose leadership has little legitimacy in the eyes of the protesters. Voters' reluctance to go to the polls underscored the lack of popular support for Tebboune and his fellow candidates. Electoral manipulation undoubtedly boosted the already low official turnout number, as in all Algeria's previous electoral contests, and the same can be assumed of the claim that 58 percent of those who voted chose Tebboune. Still, in the four presidential elections of the Bouteflika era, the

official participation rate was never below 50 percent, and the president always took more than 80 percent of the vote. This suggests that Tebboune's electoral victory was designed with an eye to making the country's pseudo-democratic system at least somewhat more credible at home and abroad. While foreign leaders generally accepted the "election" of the new president, domestically, the Hirak overwhelmingly rejected both the election process and Tebboune's victory.

On December 23, the Tebboune presidency confronted a new challenge that came not from the protesters, but from the unexpected death (due to a heart attack) of the man who masterminded Tebboune's election, General Gaid Salah. The 79-year-old chief of staff had increasingly been targeted by the Hirak as the main symbol of the old regime, while the state administration and the proregime parties had seen his leadership as a form of reassurance that the security apparatus backed the status quo. The resulting vacancy at the head of the military apparatus was swiftly filled, per Algerian military custom, by the commander of the country's ground forces, 74-year-old General Said Chengriha. The degree to which the new chief of staff supports the status quo and his willingness to use repression against the restive population are still to be tested. Gaid Salah's death is also likely to change the dynamics of intra-regime competition and heighten the struggle for influence within the Algerian security forces. At the close of 2019, therefore, the Algerian regime found itself in the unusual situation of having both a new political leader and a new military leader—albeit both septuagenarians—at a time when a powerful wave of social protest remained in full swing.

Uncertainties Ahead

At the start of 2020, Algeria entered a period of uncertainty that will be shaped by the weak legitimacy of the newly elected president, the strategic choices of the new military leader, and the continuing cycle of Hirak protests. The previous chief of staff gambled on a “reform” program orchestrated by trusted political apparatchiks, following a logic encapsulated in the phrase of novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa: “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.” The protesters of the Hirak recognized these tactics early on, and they consistently mobilized without losing momentum when the regime began promising “reforms” and “elections.” Yet as of this writing in February 2020, the main challenge for the Hirak—besides overcoming obstruction from the new president and repression by the security forces—remains organizing itself in such a way so that it can effectively negotiate an end to the protest in exchange for genuine political reform.

The new president, whose main backer in the military has unexpectedly left the scene, will seek to establish his legitimacy not only vis-à-vis the protest movement, but also vis-à-vis members of the regime. In an effort to build a ruling coalition, Tebboune has already initiated discussions with the proregime parties and politicians that were included in Bouteflika’s government. In a show of goodwill toward the Hirak, some but not all protesters have been released from jail. One tactic Tebboune could deploy to manage both internal and external pressures would be organizing early parliamentary elections with stricter electoral supervision to limit electoral fraud. This would remain a modest opening, as even a more representative and oppositional parliament would do little to undermine the regime under Algeria’s hyper-presidentialist system. Moreover, any opening is likely to be constrained by the need for the country’s new political and military leaders to establish their authority within the state

administration and security apparatus. The more they choose to prioritize internal stability for the regime, the more likely they are to opt for a repression of the Hirak.

The Hirak mobilization in Algeria illustrated both the strength and the limitations of grassroots mobilization against electoral authoritarianism. A leaderless movement can be effective in disrupting pseudodemocratic instruments of state control, but it tends to be an unwieldy instrument for pushing forward systemic political reform. Without appropriate instruments for advancing its demands on the political front, the protest movement is likely to be outmaneuvered by regime insiders—unless the latter capitulate or descend into infighting. Electoral authoritarians face their own set of tradeoffs: The more the public perceives elections to be meaningless, the less effective pseudodemocratic institutions are as a tool of governance. Authoritarian regimes can mitigate this problem to a certain extent through “reforms” and episodic internal “purges,” but these are only partial solutions. Those in power can reassert their legitimacy only through a strategy fraught with dangers for both authoritarian control of the population and power-sharing among regime elites: namely, increasingly building a more representative political system.

¹ Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

² Cited in “43e vendredi : les principaux événements,” *TSA Online*, 13 December 2019, www.tsa-algerie.com/direct-43-vendredi-et-resultats-de-la-presidentielle/amp.

³ “Le choix de la conviction,” *El Moudjahid*, 14 December 2019, www.elmoudjahid.com/fr/editorial/2276.

⁴ Cited in Makhoul Mehenni, “Tebboune tend la main au Hirak,” *TSA Online*, 13 December 2019, www.tsa-algerie.com/tebboune-tend-la-main-au-hirak.

⁵ Zoltan Barany, “Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Role of the Military,” *Journal of Democracy* 22 (October 2011): 24–35.

⁶ Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Sustaining and Subverting Electoral Authoritarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷ Frédéric Volpi, *Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁸ Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, “Debating the Color Revolutions: Getting Real About ‘Real Causes,’” *Journal of Democracy* 20 (January 2009): 69–73.

⁹ Schedler, *Politics of Uncertainty*.

¹⁰ Naoual Belakhdar, “‘L’Indépendance, c’est maintenant !’ Réflexion sur le soulèvement populaire en Algérie,” *L’Année du Maghreb* 21 (2019): 105–16.

¹¹ The main slogans of the Hirak were collected through an analysis of the following Arabic- and French-language Algerian news sources from March to December 2019: Echorouk Online (www.echoroukonline.com), El Bilad Online (www.elbilad.net), TSA Online (www.tsa-algerie.com), and El Watan (www.elwatan.com).

¹² Ligue Algérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme, “Communiqué final de la 1ere rencontre de concertation de la société civile avec les partis politiques et les personnalités nationales qui a eu lieu hier à la SAFEX Alger,” 25 August 2019. www.facebook.com/LADDH/posts/10156288421701759.

¹³ Cited in Hala Kodmani, “En Algérie, Bouteflika lâché par son entourage,” *Libération*, 20 March 2019.

¹⁴ While there is no clear consensus among scholars on how such costs and benefits are actually evaluated during episodes of unrest, some recurring features are nonetheless identifiable. See Holger Albrecht and Dorothy Ohl, “Exit, Resistance, Loyalty: Military Behavior During Unrest in Authoritarian Regimes,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14 (March 2016): 38–52.

¹⁵ Svolik, *Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

¹⁶ Frédéric Volpi, “Algeria versus the Arab Spring,” *Journal of Democracy* 24 (July 2013): 104–15.

¹⁷ “Algerian Court Upholds Jail Sentence for Bouteflika’s Brother,” France 24, 10 February 2020, www.france24.com/en/20200210-algerian-court-upholds-jail-sentence-for-bouteflika-s-brother.